Chapter 16
ANY RESIDENCE COMES TO BE A REFLECTION OF ITS PRIMARY OCCUPANT.
AND THE GARNET PALACE, WHERE CONSORT ADUO LIVES...
...IS FULL OF OBJECTS, AS ONE WOULD EXPECT FROM THE HOME OF A LONGTIME RESIDENT ...
...BUT EACH HAS A PLACE AND A PURPOSE. PRACTICALITY IS THE ORDER OF THE DAY.
CONSORT GYOKUYO'S JADE PALACE HAS A WARM, FAMILIAL FEEL.
CONSORT LIHUA'S CRYSTAL PALACE, A NOBLE, ELEGANT AIR.
WHO DO YOU HAVE WITH YOU THERE, FENG-MING?
...THE GRACE AND REFINEMENT IS OBVIOUS.
EVEN IN THE ABSENCE OF LAVISH ORNAMEN-TATION...

I DON'T BELIEVE WE'VE MET.
THE SAME COULD BE SAID OF ITS MISTRESS.
WITH NO HINT OF EXTRAVA-GANCE TO BE FOUND ON HER PERSON...
...CONSORT ADUO COULDN'T BE CALLED DAZZLING, VOLUPTUOUS, OR SWEET.
BUT WHAT SHE LACKS, SHE MAKES UP FOR WITH ANDROGYNOUS AND AUSTERE BEAUTY.
I SEE.
SHE'S HERE TO HELP WITH THE YEAR-END CLEANING.
IS SHE REALLY 35 YEARS OLD?
I MIGHT'VE MISTAKEN HER FOR A YOUNG CIVIL SERVANT IF SHE WERE IN DIFFERENT CLOTHING.
ちらっ PEEK

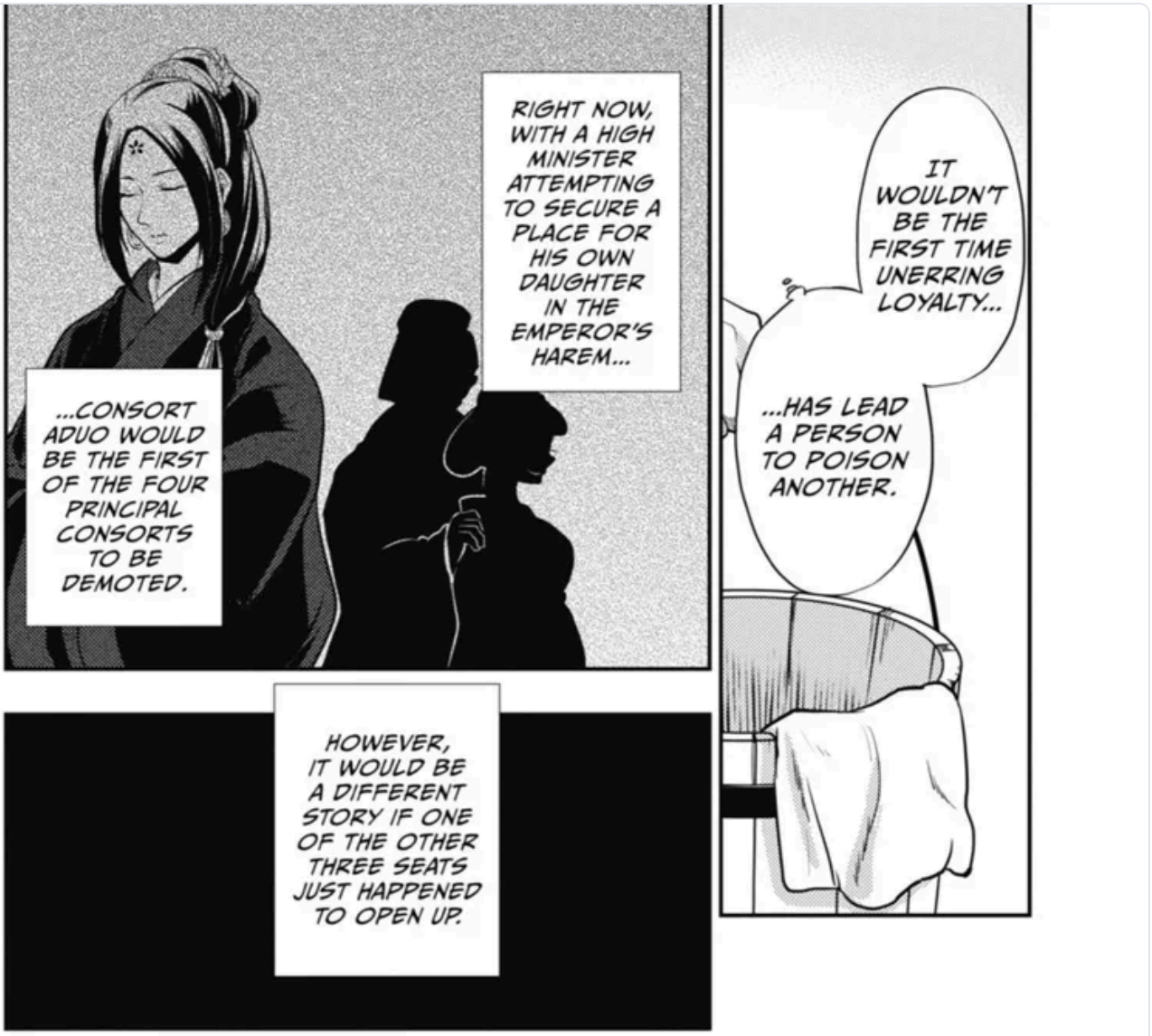
THE TUNIC AND TROUSERS OF A RIDING HABIT WOULD SUIT HER FAR BETTER...
...THAN THE WIDE SLEEVES AND SKIRTS OF A CONSORT'S WARDROBE, I DARESAY.
OOH...
YOU LOOK EVER SO ELEGANT AGAIN TODAY, MY LADY!
THAT'S ENOUGH. COME ALONG, NOW.
LOOKS LIKE SHE'S THE ENVY OF OTHER WOMEN AND THE COURT LADIES TOO.
IS CONSORT LISHU'S WOULD-BE KILLER...
...REALLY HERE IN THE GARNET PALACE?
HER CHARM IS BOTH LIKE AND UNLIKE JINSHI'S IN A WAY.
35

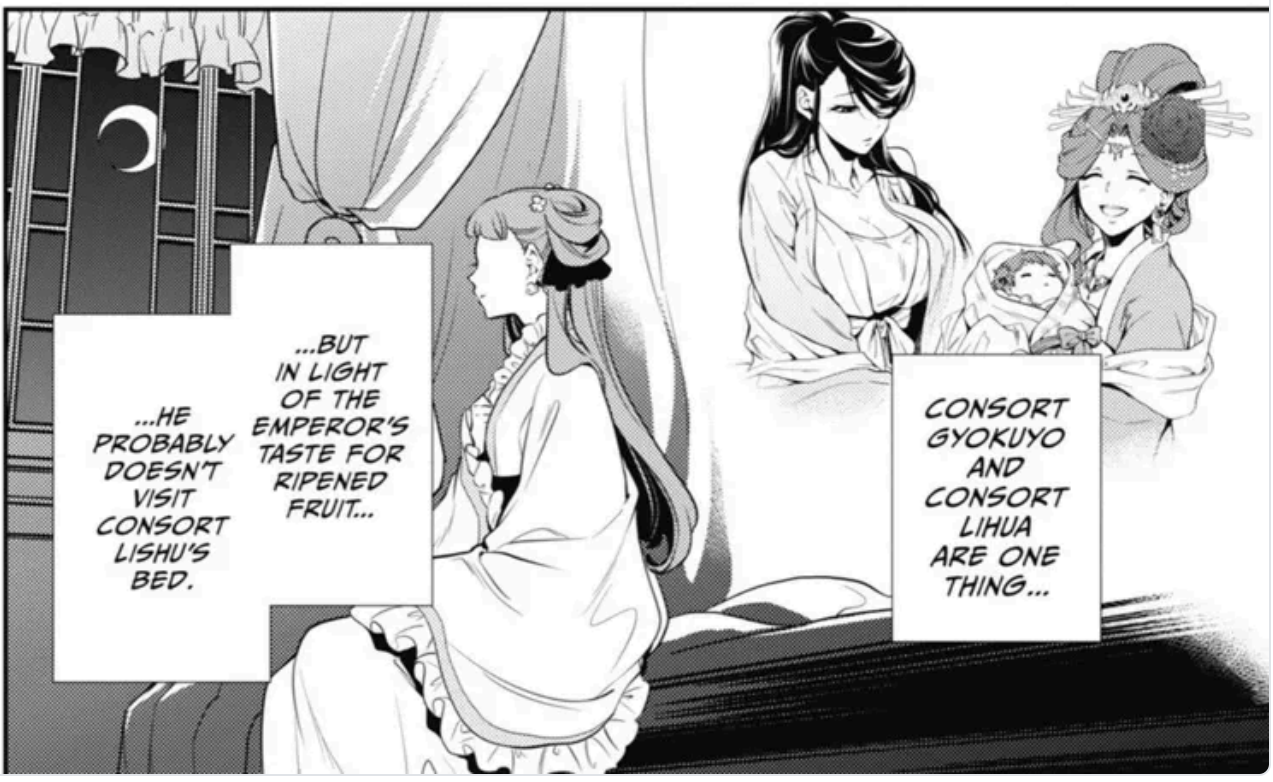
Chapter 16 Honey ①

SORRY TO HAVE YOU COME ASSIST US SUDDENLY LIKE THIS.
SHE'S HEAD LADY TO ONE OF THE FOUR PRINCIPAL CONSORTS ...
...SO SHE MUST BE FROM A RELATIVELY WELL-TO-DO FAMILY.
PERHAPS SHE'S THE DAUGHTER OF A MERCHANT OR SOME-ONE LIKE THAT.
I DON'T MIND.
CAN I ASK YOU TO AIR OUT THE BOOKS FIRST?
ALL RIGHT.
YOU CAN LEAVE THE HEAVY ONES TO THE EUNUCHS.
GARNET PALACE HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING FENGMING
BUSTLE
BUSTLE
OH MY!
I JUST CAME BY TO SEE HOW YOU WERE DOING.
I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'VE GOTTEN THIS MANY OUTSIDE ALREADY.
HOW AMAZ-ING!
CAN I ASK YOU TO HELP WITH THE INDOOR CLEANING NEXT?
YES.

CAN YOU SEE TO THAT ROOM THERE?
YES.
MOST OF ALL, FENGMING HERSELF.
QUICK てき
ALL THE LADIES-IN-WAITING OF THE GARNET PALACE ARE EXCELLENT AT WHAT THEY DO.
THEY ADORE THEIR MISTRESS AND ARE METICULOUS ABOUT THEIR DUTIES.
ぱき SWIFT
...SHE'S A HARD WORKER HERSELF, EVEN TAKING INITIATIVE WITH CHORES...
WIPE ふき
...THAT SHE COULD SIMPLY LEAVE TO ONE OF THE OTHER LADIES.
ふき WIPE
SHE'S FRIENDLY, ATTENTIVE TO OTHERS, AND QUICK TO PRAISE THEM.
SHE'S WELL-VERSED IN THE ART OF HANDLING PEOPLE, AS A HEAD LADY SHOULD BE.
AND ABOVE ALL...
DUST HERE, OF ALL PLACES?
OH DEAR.
IF SHE HADN'T COME HERE TO THE INNER COURT...
...I'M SURE SHE WOULD'VE MADE A GOOD WIFE FOR SOMEONE.

I KNOW BEING HEAD LADY PAYS WELL AND ALL...
...BUT I WONDER IF SHE'S EVER THOUGHT ABOUT GETTING MARRIED HERSELF.
THE THREE LADIES BACK AT THE JADE PALACE TALK ABOUT MARRIAGE A LOT.
THEY SERVE THEIR MISTRESS FAITH-FULLY...
...BUT THEY ALL DREAM OF A CHARMING GENTLEMAN WALKING INTO THEIR LIVES.
I THINK THAT'S PROBABLY PRETTY NORMAL.
ALTHOUGH FENGMING IS DEVOTED TO CONSORT ADUO...
...HER WORK ETHIC GOES BEYOND WHAT ONE WOULD EXPECT OF A HEAD LADY SERVING A HIGH-RANKING CONSORT.
AND IF THAT DEDICATION TO HER MISTRESS IS HER REASON FOR NOT MARRYING...


RIGHT NOW, WITH A HIGH MINISTER ATTEMPTING TO SECURE A PLACE FOR HIS OWN DAUGHTER IN THE EMPEROR'S HAREM...
...CONSORT ADUO WOULD BE THE FIRST OF THE FOUR PRINCIPAL CONSORTS TO BE DEMOTED.
IT WOULDN'T BE THE FIRST TIME UNERRING LOYALTY...
...HAS LEAD A PERSON TO POISON ANOTHER.
HOWEVER, IT WOULD BE A DIFFERENT STORY IF ONE OF THE OTHER THREE SEATS JUST HAPPENED TO OPEN UP.


...HE PROBABLY DOESN'T VISIT CONSORT LISHU'S BED.
...BUT IN LIGHT OF THE EMPEROR'S TASTE FOR RIPENED FRUIT...
CONSORT GYOKUYO AND CONSORT LIHUA ARE ONE THING...

IN OTHER WORDS ...
AS FOR THE OTHER CONCUBINES HE VISITS IN ADDITION TO THE PRINCIPAL CONSORTS, ALL ARE AMPLE OF BOSOM.
THAT MAY ALSO BE ANOTHER REASON HER ATTENDANTS TREAT HER WITH CONTEMPT.
...IT IS LIKELY THAT LADY LISHU HAS YET TO FULFILL HER KEY DUTY AS ONE OF THE EMPEROR'S CONSORTS.
EVEN AT VERDIGRIS, A GIRL GRADUATES TRAINING AND SEES HER OWN CLIENTS AT THE AGE OF 15.
THIS MAKES FOR HIGHER QUALITY COURTESANS WHO LAST LONGER IN THE LIFE.
URK!
I'D RATHER NOT THINK ABOUT THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR'S APPETITE FOR YOUNG GIRLS.
THAT'S A GOOD THING, THOUGH.
SHE MAY BE OF MARRYING AGE...
...BUT GETTING PREGNANT AND BEARING A CHILD WOULD BE VERY HARD ON HER 14-YEAR-OLD BODY.
IN YOU GET.

SQUEEZE
...IF ONE OF CONSORT ADUO'S LADIES WAS GOING TO POISON ANOTHER IN HER MISTRESS'S NAME...
THAT SAID...
...CONSORT LISHU MAKES A LOGICAL TARGET.
HMM?
OH, THOSE?
JUST WIPE DOWN THE SHELVES AND THEN PUT EACH JAR BACK WHERE IT WAS.
WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH THESE?
VAST ARRAY
42

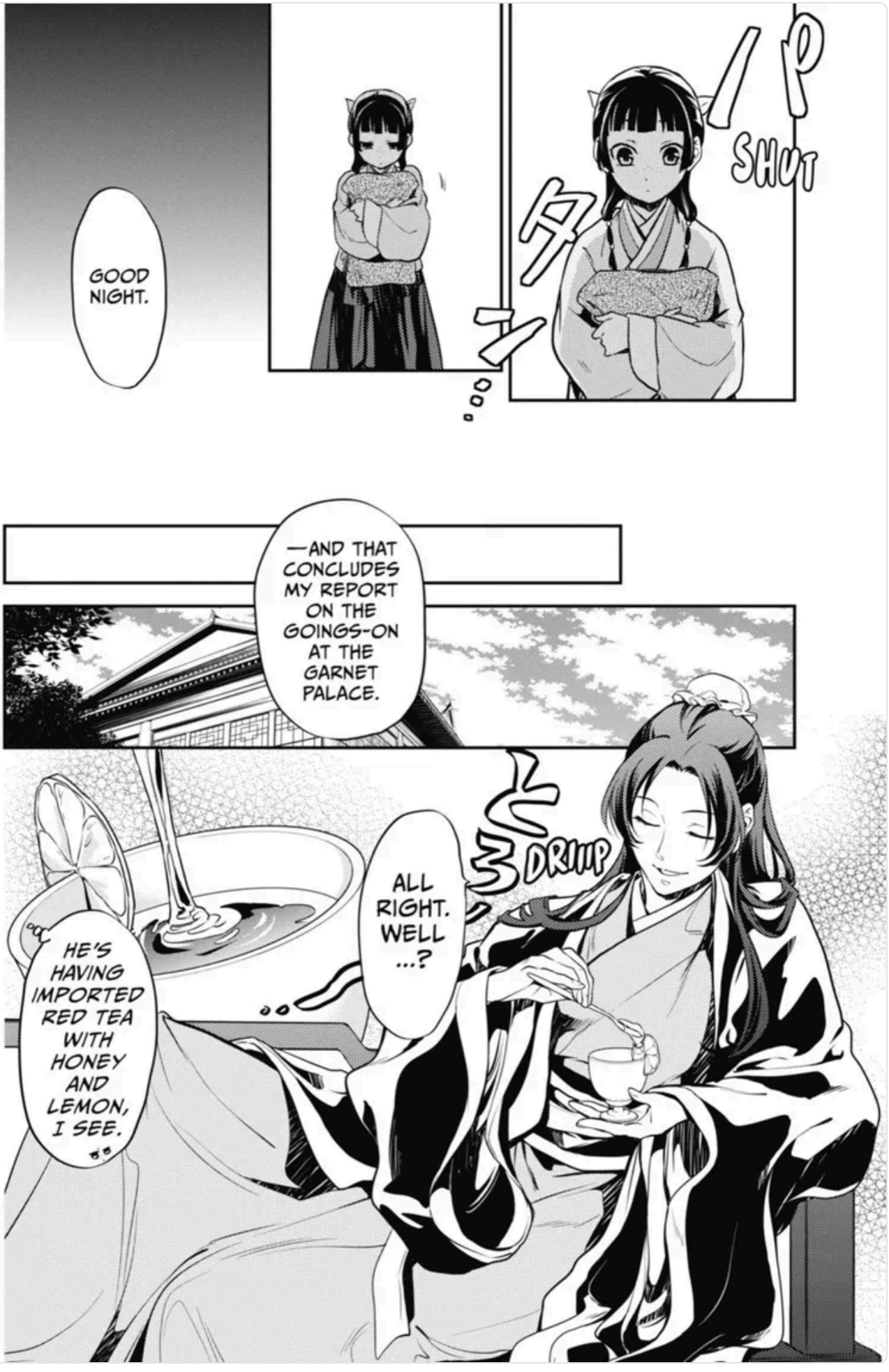
ARE THESE JARS ALL FULL OF HONEY?
THESE ARE BROWN AND REDDISH-BROWN.
THIS ONE IS AN AMBER HUE.
THAT EXPLAINS THE QUANTITY OF JARS HERE.
HONEY IS A LUXURY. ONE TYPE WOULD NORMALLY BE MORE THAN ENOUGH.
NO WON-DER, THEN.
YES.
IT COMES FROM THE BEES KEPT BY LADY FENGMING'S FAMILY.
ALL RIGHT.
WE'RE ALWAYS FORGETTING TO DO THOSE.
WHEN YOU'RE DONE THERE, PLEASE WIPE DOWN THE BANISTERS ON THE SECOND FLOOR.
HONEY, HMM?

HONEY...
THAT CAME UP RECENTLY, DIDN'T IT? BUT WHERE?
カサッ
RUSTLE
...ISN'T THAT...
RUSTLE
ヨ!!
...CONSORT LISHU AND HER FOOD TASTER?
きょろ
LOOK
きょろ
LOOK
WHAT ARE THEY DOING HERE ALL BY THEM-SELVES?

SPEAK-ING OF CONSORT LISHU...
HALT
はた。。
I WONDER WHY SHE DOESN'T LIKE HONEY?
FENGMING PRAISING ME FOR EVERY LITTLE THING...
...MADE ME NOT WANT TO SLACK OFF ONE BIT.
THANK YOU FOR YOUR HARD WORK TODAY.
OOF.
IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I FELT LIKE I REALLY DID A HARD DAY'S WORK LIKE THIS.

WOULD YOU COME WITH ME FOR A MOMENT?
OH! THAT REMINDS ME.
IT'S GOTTEN QUITE LATE, SO YOU CAN SPEND THE NIGHT HERE.
SHE KEEPS IT PRETTY NEAT.
LOOKS ABOUT THE SAME AS HONG-NIANG'S, WHICH I'VE BEEN INSIDE BEFORE.
HM?
SHE BROUGHT ME TO HER QUARTERS? THAT'S UNUSUAL.
WAIT HERE.
46

OH!
THIS IS A BLANKET OF MINE, WHICH YOU'RE MOST WELCOME TO USE.
SORRY TO KEEP YOU WAITING.
THAT'S A—
THE PALACE GETS QUITE COLD AT NIGHT.
IT'S MADE OF ANIMAL FUR.
THANK YOU VERY MUCH.
...YES, THANK YOU AGAIN.
GOOD NIGHT.
I HOPE YOU HAVE A NICE EVENING HERE.


GOOD NIGHT.
SHUT
—AND THAT CONCLUDES MY REPORT ON THE GOINGS-ON AT THE GARNET PALACE.
DRIIP
ALL RIGHT. WELL ...?
HE'S HAVING IMPORTED RED TEA WITH HONEY AND LEMON, I SEE.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS HE'S TRYING TO GET OUT OF ME.
I'M JUST A SIMPLE APOTH-ECARY.
USING ME AS A SPY OR SOME-SUCH IS ABSURD.
I FEEL AS IF HIS TONE AND ATTITUDE HAVE GROWN FAR MORE CASUAL OF LATE.
SO THAT'S THAT.
IF YOU'RE IN NEED OF CLUES...
...FEEL FREE TO RETURN TO THE GARNET PALACE AGAIN.
DID YOU ENCOUNTER ANYONE SUSPICIOUS THERE?
...I HATE HOW HE'S ASKING.
I'M NOT ONE TO SHARE UNFOUNDED IDEAS.
BUT...

WE LOOKED, BUT WE DIDN'T FIND IT.
THE MAID WHO DIED IN THE MOAT...
DID YOU HAPPEN TO FISH OUT HER OTHER SHOE?
...I SEE.
SIGH
WHAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT?
...LADY FENGMING, CONSORT ADUO'S HEAD ATTENDANT, MAY BE INVOLVED.
I'M ONLY GUESSING HERE...
...BUT I THINK IT'S POSSIBLE THAT...
...AND SAW A SHOE ON THE FLOOR, THE KIND WORN BY A WOMAN WITH BOUND FEET.
I TOOK A PEEK IN HER ROOM...

LADY FENGMING DOESN'T WALK WITH THE GAIT OF SOMEONE WHOSE FEET ARE BOUND...
...SO THE SHOE MUST NOT BELONG TO HER.
IN WHICH CASE ...
...I HAVE TO BELIEVE SHE PICKED UP THAT LONE SHOE SOMEWHERE.
GIVEN THE DRAMATIC WAY HE'S EATING THAT HONEY...
...HE MUST'VE ALREADY FOUND OUT THIS MUCH HIMSELF.
...WELL, I GIVE YOU A PASSING GRADE FOR THAT.
WHAT'S HE EVEN GETTING AT?
I CAN'T IMAGINE A WOMAN AS GENTLE AS FENGMING PLOTTING SOMETHING LIKE THAT...
I WON'T BE ABLE TO GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THIS WITHOUT AN OBJECTIVE EYE.
...BUT THAT'S JUST MY PERSONAL VIEW.
KLATTR

GOOD GIRLS DESERVE A REWARD, HMM?
ぷっ
ずDIP
NO, THANK YOU.
SHUDDER SHUDDER SHUDDER
NO NEED TO BE SHY.
NO, THANK YOU. I MEAN IT.
PLEASE OFFER THAT KIND OF REWARD TO SOMEONE ELSE.
DRIP

SIDLE にじり
にじり SIDLE
I'D GLOSSED OVER WHAT A DEVIANT HE IS!!
HE THINKS HE CAN GET AWAY WITH ANYTHING JUST 'COS HE HAS A PRETTY FACE!!
THIS MAD-MAN!!
WHERE DID GAO SHUN GET TO?!
RGH!
THMP
I'M SO GOING TO GIVE YOU A LAXATIVE LATER.
ガ SHOCK ン
CHIRP チュン
CHIRP チュン
53

NO, I'M NOT. I PREFER SALTY FOOD.
BUT YOU CAN EAT THIS, CAN'T YOU?
ARE YOU NOT FOND OF SWEET THINGS?
OH, WAIT.
NO POINT IN KICKING SOMETHING THAT'S NOT THERE.
HE'D BE ON THE RECEIVING END OF A SWIFT KICK TO THE CROTCH RIGHT NOW IF HE WEREN'T IN SUCH A HIGH POSITION.
DAMN! HE'S NOT HEARING A WORD I SAY.
I'D PARTAKE BEGRUDG-INGLY IF IT WERE WOLFS-BANE HONEY.
GRRRRGH!

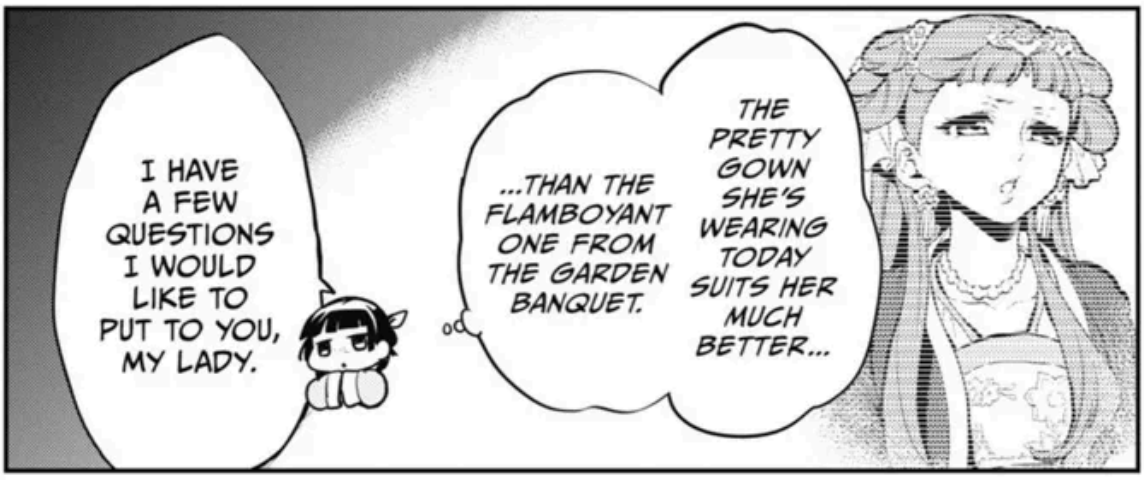
HONEY FROM A POISONOUS FLOWER IS STILL POISON, AFTER ALL.
HUH ...?
MAY I ASK WHAT IT IS YOU'RE DOING WITH ONE OF MY LADIES?

WHO GAVE YOU LEAVE TO DO THIS?
OH! ER, UH, I—!
COULD YOU PLEASE FIND IT IN YOUR HEART TO FORGIVE HIM?
SIR JINSHI JUST TOOK ONE OF HIS JOKES TOO FAR.
XIAO-MAO.
THAT MIGHT BE A BIT TOO MUCH FOR ME...
SHUDDER
SO LONG AS YOU UNDER-STAND HOW I FEEL.
L-LICK-ING?!
I SUPPOSE WE WON'T HAVE A PROBLEM IF YOU'RE THE ONE DOING THE LICKING FROM NOW ON.
HMPH!
FUNNY THING TO SAY FOR SOMEONE WHO HAD NO INTEN-TION OF STOPPING HIM...

ANYWAY, GAO SHUN...
...THERE ARE A FEW THINGS I WOULD LIKE TO LOOK INTO.
THIS IS...
THE DIAMOND PALACE, CONSORT LISHU'S HOME.
PLEASE PARDON OUR INTRU-SION.
57

ぱっ GLOW
WELCO—
LOOK キョロ
...SIR JINSHI'S NOT HERE WITH YOU TODAY, IS HE?
キョロ LOOK
OH?
I HUMBLY APOLOGIZE FOR CALLING UPON YOU WITHOUT NOTICE, MY LADY.

SIIIIGH...
SO?
WHAT BUSINESS DOES ANOTHER CONSORT'S LADY-IN-WAITING HAVE HERE?
CONSORT LISHU IS A BEAUTY, NO DOUBT.
BUT SHE'S STILL YOUNG AND LACKING IN CHARM.


THE PRETTY GOWN SHE'S WEARING TODAY SUITS HER MUCH BETTER...
...THAN THE FLAMBOYANT ONE FROM THE GARDEN BANQUET.
I HAVE A FEW QUESTIONS I WOULD LIKE TO PUT TO YOU, MY LADY.

SO WHAT IS IT YOU WISH TO KNOW?
...YOU'RE THE GIRL FROM THE BANQUET.
STARE
DO YOU HAVE A DISLIKE FOR HONEY?
!
HOW COULD YOU TELL?!
FROM THE LOOK ON YOUR FACE WHEN IT WAS BROUGHT OUT.
HMPH!
POUT
59

HAS HONEY EVER UPSET YOUR STOMACH?
IT'S NOT UNUSUAL FOR SOMEONE WHOSE BODY DISAGREES WITH A FOOD SO MUCH THAT IT REACTS AS IF IT HAS BEEN POISONED ...
...TO BECOME UNABLE TO EAT THAT FOOD.
I WAS STILL A BABY AT THE TIME.
I DON'T REMEMBER IT, ACTUALLY.
SHAKE
SHAKE
NO, THAT'S NOT QUITE RIGHT.
BUT I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT I ONCE ATE HONEY BY ACCIDENT...
...AND NEARLY DIED.
SINCE THEN, I'VE BEEN TOLD BY MY NURSEMAIDS AND LADIES TO NEVER TOUCH THE STUFF.

JUST WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?!
THAT'S MIGHTY RUDE OF YOU!
HOW DARE YOU TRAIPSE IN HERE AND HARASS OUR LADY ABOUT THINGS THAT TROUBLE HER?!
EXCUSE ME?!
HMM...
I SEE.

...TO COVER FOR YOUR PRECIOUS MISTRESS AT THE TEA PARTY THE OTHER DAY.
HMPH! YOU'RE ONE TO TALK. YOU COULDN'T EVEN BE BOTHERED...

WHAT'S THAT LOOK FOR?!
...THAT THEY ALONE ARE ON LADY LISHU'S SIDE.
I'M GUESSING THEY'RE IN THE HABIT OF CASTING OUTSIDERS AS THE ENEMY FROM TIME TO TIME AND PRETENDING ...

61

THE YOUNG CONSORT LISHU HAS NO ONE TO RELY ON BUT HER LADIES.
SHE'S AN ENEMY!
THEY FIRST CONVINCE HER THAT THERE ARE ENEMIES ALL AROUND HER...
...AND THEN PROCEED TO ISOLATE HER BY CLAIMING THEY'RE HER ONLY ALLIES.
SHE DOESN'T REALIZE SHE'S BEING BULLIED ...
...AND SHE CAN'T BRING IT TO ANYONE ELSE'S ATTEN-TION.
WHAT'S YOUR PROB-LEM?
SIGH
IT'S A VICIOUS CYCLE.
MENACE
IF YOU HAVE ANY COMPLAINTS, YOU CAN TAKE THEM UP DIRECTLY WITH SIR JINSHI.
I AM HERE UNDER ORDERS.

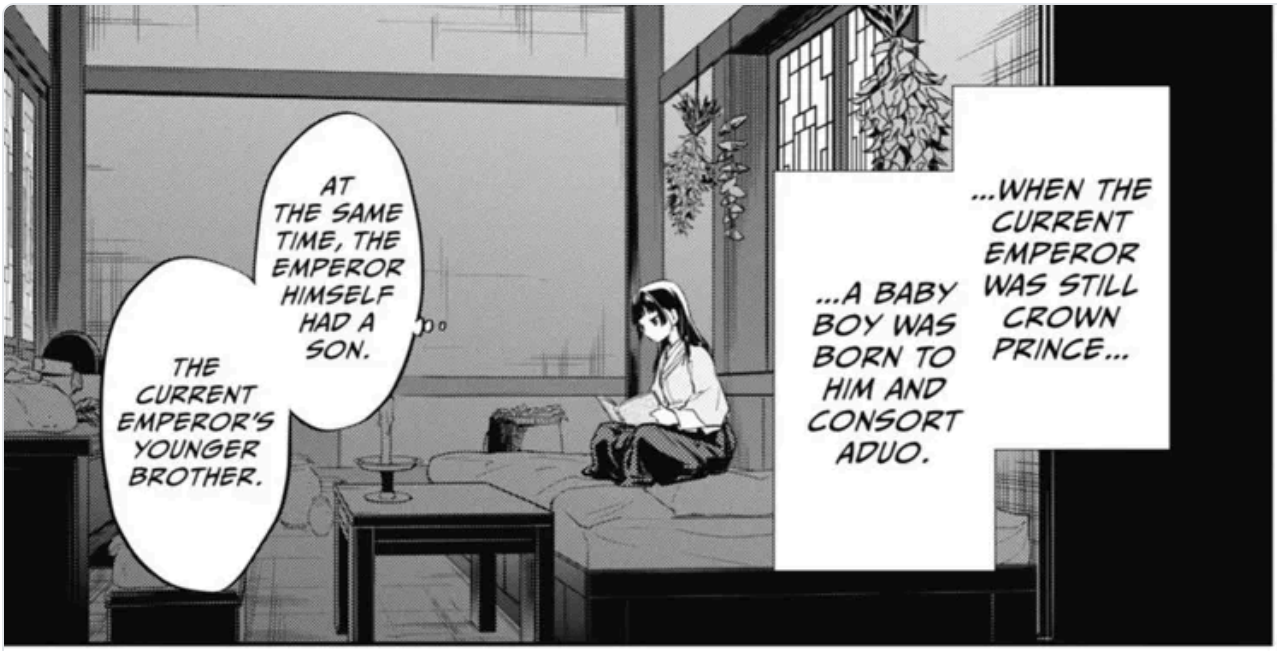
HEH!
I'M SURE I CAN GET AWAY WITH THIS KIND OF PAY-BACK.
D—
DIRECTLY ...?! TO S-S-SIR JINSHI?!
I DO SO LOOK FORWARD TO FINDING OUT WHAT PRETENSE SHE'LL EMPLOY...
...TO APPROACH JINSHI.
CONSORT LISHU, I HAVE ONE MORE QUESTION FOR YOU.
WHAT IS IT?
ARE YOU ACQUAINTED WITH...
63

...LADY FENGMING, THE HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING OF THE GARNET PALACE?
!
UM...

IF YOU WOULD BE SO KIND...
PLEASE TELL ME HOW YOU KNOW HER.
WELL...
... XIAO-MAO?

.....
IS THERE SOME WAY TO FIND OUT ABOUT PAST EVENTS THAT TOOK PLACE HERE AT THE INNER COURT?
GAO SHUN.
...LET'S TRY THE COURT LIBRARY.

17 YEARS AGO...


...WHEN THE CURRENT EMPEROR WAS STILL CROWN PRINCE...
...A BABY BOY WAS BORN TO HIM AND CONSORT ADUO.
AT THE SAME TIME, THE EMPEROR HIMSELF HAD A SON.
THE CURRENT EMPEROR'S YOUNGER BROTHER.

SO THE ONLY CONSORT HE HAD AT THE TIME WAS CONSORT ADUO.
IT'S SURPRISING THAT HE WAS MARRIED TO HER, AND HER ALONE...
...FOR OVER TEN YEARS.

OF THE TWO BOYS, CONSORT ADUO'S SON DIED IN INFANCY.
NOT LONG AFTER, THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR PASSED AWAY, AND THE CURRENT EMPEROR TOOK THE THRONE. HE WOULD HAVE NO OTHER-CHILDREN...
...UNTIL HIS OWN HAREM WAS ESTAB-LISHED.

IT SEEMS THE TWO OF THEM SHARED A WET NURSE AS INFANTS AND GREW UP TOGETHER.
THEY MUST BE VERY CLOSE.

I'M GLAD I ASKED GAO SHUN TO DIG THESE OUT FOR ME.
...INSTEAD OF JUST RUMORS AND HEARSAY.
I HAD A FEELING I'D NEED RECORDED FACTS...
"DIED IN INFANCY 16 YEARS AGO."
THE MIDWIFE WAS...
OH, I SEE...
68

...WERE REGU-LARLY USED ONCE UPON A TIME.
THE ABUNDANT MEDICINAL HERBS GROWING HERE IN THE INNER COURT...
I HAD A FEELING AS MUCH.
THERE'S ONLY ONE PERSON I KNOW WHO GROWS MEDICINAL PLANTS...
...NOT THAT THEY GREW HERE NATURALLY.
I'D IMAGINED THEY WERE TRANS-PLANTED HERE...
...WHOSE EXTENSIVE MEDICAL SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE ARE WASTED AS THE APOTHECARY OF THE PLEASURE DISTRICT...
A MAN WHO DRAGS HIS FEET LIKE AN OLD WOMAN...
...BY HIS HOME LIKE THIS...

A FORMER EUNUCH WHO HAD ONE OF HIS KNEECAPS REMOVED...
WHAT IN THE WORLD HAVE YOU DONE...
...PA?